

Coming Home

by Cynamin

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Summary: Strange Place to Live #1. Angel returns to Sunnydale and ends up in the hospital.

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SUMMARY: Angel is back in Sunnydale -- and mysteriously in the hospital. What happened, and who is the shadowy figure in the alley?

>DISCLAIMER: Okay, obviously anything you recognize, I don't own. Buffy: The Vampire Slayer and all related characters, etc. doesn't belong to me. I'm just borrowing them. I don't any of the song lyrics, either. What I do own is the plot and events of these specific stories, and any characters you don't recognize.

ARCHIVE: Just ask, please. All of my stories can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/cynandmeg>

>AUTHOR'S NOTES: This is Book One of my "Strange Place to Live" series. It takes place after Angel's been in L.A. for a year. This story is mostly fluff, but it's also a set up for the rest of my series, so please give it a chance. This was the first piece of Buffy fan fiction I managed to complete.
SPOILERS: I started writing this series before Helpless, so Giles was never fired. However, I did know Angel was going to be leaving, and I assumed Faith would be somehow written out. No real spoilers, though.

>FEEDBACK: Any comments are not only welcome, but begged for. <p>

* * *

> <h3>Prologue<h3>

_"I have been given

>one moment from heaven
as I am walking
>surrounded by night,
Stars high above me
>make a wish under moonlight."
~On My Way Home
>Enya

Sunnydale, CA
>Friday night <p>

On the surface everything was calm in Sunnydale. It was a warm, clear night in the early summer and the local residents made their ways home for a relaxing evening. Even the vampires were quiet this evening.

But things can always change.

There were two new arrivals in Sunnydale.

The first one had been here before, and hoped to be staying for a while. Angel leaned against his car and looked up at the sky. It felt good to be back in Sunnydale. He hadn't told anyone he was coming back to town and didn't even know where he was going to stay yet. Seeing as how it was after sundown but still early in the relatively evening, he figured he'd try and find Buffy. He'd follow her for a while, like he used to, and find out what was going on. Just watch. She was probably already patrolling. Keeping to the shadows, Angel made his quiet way through the nighttime streets.

The second new arrival also made his way through town, keeping to the shadows as well. He too was looking for someone. But he was not happy to be in Sunnydale. Magically armed, he searched for his prey.

With two people lurking in the same shadowy streets with the same sort of destinations in mind - local cemeteries perhaps - it may have been only a matter of time before they would run into each other. Or perhaps it was intentional, planned by someone or something.

Angel turned down an alley off of one of the quieter streets. He was preoccupied by his thoughts, and so was not aware of the hunter until they practically ran into each other. Angel was about to apologize and move on when the hunter snarled in anger and began to chant. Before Angel could make any move to flee or attack he was consumed by a terrible pain that made him cry out, then fell to the ground, unconscious.

The Hunter smiled and lifted a stake.

* * *

> <h3>Part One</h3>

_"You're ruling the way I move
>and I breathe your air
You only can rescue me
>This is my prayer"
~Cherish the Day
>Sade

Sunnydale, CA
>Friday night <p>

The sun had only recently set in Sunnydale when Father Riley walked from the Sunnydale Church of God. He was new in town. If he'd been

there longer he might have known that it was best not to walk far after dark. But the priest's car was parked a good distance from his church, and no one had yet spoken to him about Sunnydale's more unusual dangers.

Father Riley was a young man, just recently ordained, and the Sunnydale Church of God was his first congregation. His predecessor had died unexpectedly - something about a neck wound and massive blood loss. When Father Riley had first come to Sunnydale, he was amazed by the number of churches within the relatively small town. He felt he was lucky to have come to a town this religiously inclined. Even his rather small church had a loyal following. Father Riley was not concerned over church attendance. What he was worried about was significant parking.

Today, Father Riley had had to park what seemed to be half way across town. While during the daytime it had been a pleasant walk to the church, the return trip after sundown was just a little bit scary. He couldn't wait to get back to his car. He was hyper-alert. The priest soon found himself jumping at every little noise.

A cry of pain rang out nearby, and Father Riley jumped for real. Then, heedless of any danger that might be involved, he ran down the street towards the source of the sound, around the corner and into a darkened alley. What he saw there surprised him. One figure - Father Riley assumed the one who had cried out - lay on the ground unmoving. A second masculine figure was standing over it, something sharp in one hand, ready to strike.

"Hey!" called out the priest as he ran towards them. The standing figure dropped his weapon and ran.

Father Riley quickly ignored the attacker and knelt over the fallen man. Thankful for the first aid class he'd been required to take back in high school, he checked for pulse and breathing. Finding none, he took out his cell phone and dialed 911. He explained the situation as clearly and succinctly as he could, telling them the location and what he'd seen. Then, the call over, he proceeded to attempt CPR.

Now, he thought frantically. *Is it five compressions and three breaths? Or five and one? Or maybe three and one?* Figuring that the young man couldn't be harmed at this point whatever he tried, the priest began.

As he leaned forward to try and get the man breathing again, a most startling thing happened. Father Riley's cross necklace swung forward and hit the man in the chin. It left a distinct burn mark. The young priest pulled back in surprise, touching his cross to see if it had somehow become hot. It was cool to the touch. But the young man had been quite clearly been burned by it. Father Riley felt himself becoming lightly afraid. *What the . . .* he pulled back, stopping CPR.

Don't be an idiot! he silently berated himself. *It probably didn't burn him. He probably already had the burn and you just didn't notice until now.* Somehow he was not quite able to convince himself. *He needs your help!* he finally yelled at himself. *Whoever - whatever he is, he needs your help.*

Single-mindedly the priest returned to his task. As he did so he began to pray.

Time seemed to drag by as Father Riley continued to try CPR. He was caught in the rhythm, his mind no longer on his task. Instead it was busy trying to think of any prayer he'd ever learned. He was not a doctor, just a confused priest, and there was nothing else that was in his power to do.

The sound of a siren approaching helped Father Riley focus again on what he was doing. His arms were exhausted and he knew he couldn't have continued much longer. He only hoped he'd done some good.

The ambulance came to a stop at the head of the alley and Father Riley was quickly surrounded by paramedics. They pulled him away from the young man to take over. He still wasn't breathing, but one of the paramedics announced that she found a weak pulse and they quickly moved him to the ambulance.

"Hey!" called out Father Riley as they ran towards the ambulance.
"Can I come along?"

One of the paramedics shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but there just isn't room."

The priest continued to stand by them as they got back on the ambulance. He wasn't willing to just leave it at this. His common sense told him he'd done his act as good samaritan, but he couldn't listen. For good or ill, he had to know what happened. He couldn't just stand by never knowing what became of the young man, whether or not he lived.

As the driver climbed back into the ambulance, Father Riley called out to him again. "Wait!" he cried. "Where are you taking him?"

"Sunnydale Hospital," the man said. Then the sirens started again and the ambulance sped off into the night.

For a moment Father Riley only stood there in silence. Then, as the silence became too oppressive, he remembered that this had been the site of an attack and the attacker could still be around.

Hurrying to his car, Father Riley almost tripped over something. Looking down he recognized it as the attacker's weapon. He knelt closer to study it. It was wood - a sharpened piece of wood. He shook his head in bewilderment. Definitely not your usual weapon.

Finally the priest decided he'd had enough oddness for one night. Getting in his car, he headed for Sunnydale Hospital.

* * *

> <h3>Part Two</h3>

_ "Say stranger how did we meet
> Who will hear us when we start to speak
 Our shadows are still
out on the street
> Our skin still as white as a sheet
 Our time is short and fleet"

>~Tip Toe
Kila_

Sunnydale Hospital
>Saturday morning <p>

Dr. Baker emerged from the patient's room. He wiped his eyes in fatigue, looking forward to getting a couple of hours sleep. Glad as he was that the young man was okay, he hated not knowing anything about those he treated. Not only did it make things more difficult medically, it also felt very impersonal. He liked telling people that everything was okay. Unknown patients lying silently in empty hospital rooms were a very lonely sight.

"Excuse me!" A voice down the hall caught Dr. Baker's attention. It was a young man, hurrying towards him. He wore a dress shirt and pants and a relatively large cross. He looked like he too had had a long night.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so," the man replied. "I'm looking for Dr. Baker?"

The doctor nodded. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Joshua Riley," the man introduced himself. "I was looking for information about a patient who came in by ambulance last evening. I was told you could tell me what happened to him."

"The patient's name?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know his name," Mr. Riley explained. "Young man, rather tall, dark hair, was brought in about nine o'clock last night."

Dr. Baker was at a quandary. On the one hand, this was his mystery patient, and it made him feel better to know someone was asking about him. On the other, he had no idea really who was asking, or why. "Well then, Mr. Riley, I'm sorry, but I can not give out that information."

The man fidgeted in frustration. "Doctor," he said, "I'm the man who found him, who called the ambulance. I just want to know if he's okay."

This caused the doctor to smile slightly, at least inside. "He's unconscious, but alive," Dr. Baker said. "He has you to thank or that, at least in part. Without your quick action he would not have made it."

"Thank you," the man said, smiling now slightly. "I was worried." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "Can you tell me anything else?"

"I'm sorry. You must understand that I can not give out anymore information to someone who's not family."

Joshua Riley sighed. "Doctor," he said, "I am a priest. I only wish to help where I can. Any information you give will not go beyond me." When the doctor continued to hesitate, Riley continued. "If there is nothing I can do, I will go on my way. But I'd like to speak to any

family if I could. If you've managed to contact them." Looking into the doctor's eye, he made a statement that was only half question. "You haven't found any family."

Doctor Baker sighed, giving in to the priest's persistence. "No, we haven't," he said. After all, in saying that, what did he have to lose? The priest nodded very slightly as if he knew all along that would be the answer. "Is there anything I could do to help?"

Though he sounded quite sincere, Dr. Baker was still hesitant to say anything more. It had been a long night, however, and perhaps with Father Riley's help he could finish soon. Then maybe he could get some sleep before his next shift. "Come with me," he said finally. "Let me show you something, and then you tell me if you can help."

* * *

> <h3>Part Three</h3>

_ "Oh, memory has a keen edge
> drawing blood and sometimes more
 And all my pretty horses fly
> Oh my childhood, coming to see me
 in the shapes of those I've
loved"
> ~All My Pretty Horses
 The Nields_

Summers' Residence

> Late morning, Saturday <p>

Joyce Summers was just cleaning up hers and Buffy's breakfast when the doorbell rang. She quickly put down the plate she was holding in the sink and hurried to the door. It was probably one of Buffy's friends, but Buffy was upstairs getting ready.

When she opened the door she was surprised to be faced with a young man she did not recognize. "Can I help you?" Joyce asked.

"Yes, I hope," the man said. He glanced at a piece of paper he held, then asked, "Does Buffy Summers live here?"

"Uh, yes, I'm her mother. Can I help you?" Mrs. Summers asked again, confused. She seemed to be confused quite often when it came to anything having to do with Buffy.

"My name is Joshua Riley. I'm the new priest at the Sunnydale Church of God. I just need to speak with your daughter. May I come in?"

Mrs. Summers nodded and stood aside to let him enter. She watched the priest a bit warily as he made his way to have a seat on the couch, then she stepped to the bottom of the stairs. "Buffy!" she called. "There's someone here to see you!"

"Be down in a minute!" she called back.

"She'll be right down," Joyce said to the priest as she sat across from him. "May I ask what this is about?"

The priest shifted a bit as he sat, as if uncertain of how to

proceed. He played a bit with the piece of paper he carried. It looked like an envelope, but she couldn't be sure without looking closer. He looked at the paper, then back at Joyce. "Does your daughter know someone called Angel?" he asked finally.

Mrs. Summers was surprised. She hadn't heard Angel mentioned in a while. Last she'd heard he was in L.A. "Yes, she does," Joyce answered.

The young man looked slightly relieved. Still, he continued. "Young man, tall dark hair, tattoo on his back?"

Joyce nodded, even more confused as the questions went on. "Yes," she confirmed. "I don't know about any tattoo, but Buffy would know." She thought a touch uncomfortably that Buffy would definitely know whether Angel had a tattoo.

"Know what?"

Buffy came down the stairs and into the room with her mother and the priest. Looking at her as she took a seat and glanced worriedly at them both, Mrs. Summers replied, "Whether or not Angel has a tattoo."

"Yeah, he does. Some sort of bird-thing on a letter 'A'," she replied automatically. Then she looked closer at her mom and the priest. "Why are we talking about this?" Then, to the priest, "Who are you?"

"My name is Joshua Riley," he introduced himself again. He took the piece of paper he had been holding and gave it to Buffy. "Miss Summers," he said, "did you write this?"

As Buffy took the paper, Joyce could see that it was indeed an envelope. Inside was a piece of paper, one that looked like it had been read and refolded many times. Buffy took it carefully and looked at it a moment before saying, "Where did you get this?"

Father Riley shifted nervously. "Last night," he began slowly, "there . . . was an accident. Angel was taken by ambulance to Sunnydale Hospital, where he was treated. . . . They managed to restart his heart, and. . . ."

"Excuse me?!"

"The doctor says he should be fine, but he's still unconscious, and _"

Buffy cut him off sharply and shook her head slightly in confusion. "You said Angel's in the hospital?" she asked.

The priest nodded patiently. "Yes, Miss Summers."

"As a patient?"

She was looking at the priest like she'd suddenly noticed he had two heads. Joyce could understand her daughter's confusion. *I mean, Angel's a vampire. From what Buffy told me, a vampire is dead. Dead men don't end up in hospitals in places other than the morgue.*

"Yes, Miss Summers," Father Riley was saying again, but now looked confused at this line of questioning.

"And you said he's going to . . . live?" Buffy asked, confirming her mother's thoughts from a moment before.

This time the priest simply nodded in response. Buffy said nothing, but only stared at him as if she was having trouble completely comprehending the conversation. After a moment, the priest spoke again. "The only thing he had with him for us to identify him was that letter. I was hoping you could help me find any family."

Buffy looked at the letter she still held in her hand. "I'm the closest he has," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Angel doesn't have any family," she said more clearly. "But . . . I'd like to come and see him, if I can." She looked at her mother for confirmation. Joyce nodded.

At the same time, the priest said, "Of course."

Buffy stood quickly, her expression still a little vague. "Mom, could you call Giles for me? Tell him where I've gone."

Joyce understood. Buffy meant *call Giles and tell him something weird is going on.* She nodded, and Buffy hurried out the door, followed closely by Father Riley. A familiar wave of confusion swept over Mrs. Summers as she wondered what exactly had just happened. She hoped that everything would turn out okay, for Buffy's sake. She didn't dwell on it for long, though, she couldn't. This was Sunnydale, and you just had to take what happened as it came.

Allowing herself a small sigh, Joyce picked up the phone and dialed Giles.

* * *

> <h3>Part Four<h3>

_ "If you dream of me
> like I dream of you
 in a place that's warm and dark
> in a place where I can hear the beating of your heart"
 ~The Promise
> Tracy Chapman

Sunnydale Hospital
> Saturday afternoon <p>

Buffy walked apprehensively through the corridors of the hospital. She couldn't stand hospitals and tried to avoid them at all costs. But sometimes she couldn't, like when a friend was there. All too often her friends could end up in the hospital. Today, that friend was the only one she thought she'd never see here - Angel.

She followed the young priest's lead as he stopped at a nurses station. "Excuse me," he asked, "We're here to see Dr. Baker?"

The nurse nodded and directed them to a room down the hall. As they got near a doctor stepped from a room and waved to Father Riley in acknowledgment. "Father Riley," he called.

The priest nodded. "Dr. Baker," he said. "May I introduce Buffy Summers?"

Buffy tried to keep up a brave face, but she was filled with dread. She was not used to dealing with the doctors, especially not alone. She shook his hand by way of introduction.

"You're the author of the letter?" the doctor asked.

"Yeah," said Buffy. She didn't know quite what to say. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, like *what happened?* and *what the hell is going on?* but couldn't. Father Riley had told her as much as he knew about what had happened, and Giles was a much better person to ask what was going on in Sunnydale. So, Buffy settled for, "How is he?"

"Stable now, Ms. Summers," said Dr. Baker calmly. "His heartbeat is normal, but we're keeping a close watch on him just in case. And he is still unconscious."

He's not supposed to have a heartbeat, thought Buffy in nervous frustration. *Angel, what happened to you? What's going on?*

"Will he be okay?" She looked at the doctor for reassurance, then felt silly for doing so. The doctor didn't know what had really happened. He didn't know if he'd be okay.

"There is nothing apparently wrong," explained the doctor. "He should wake up at any time, but - Ms. Summers, we don't know what caused this."

That's exactly what I'd like to know. "Can I see him?"

"Certainly, Ms. Summers. I'd just like to ask you a few questions first."

So Buffy sat distractedly listening to Dr. Baker's questions, Father Riley sitting beside her. No, she didn't know Angel's last name. No he didn't have any family, they're dead. *He killed them, over 200 years ago.* Buffy stared at the door to Angel's room. She needed to see him. Medical history - perfect health. *For a dead guy.* No known allergies. *He's a vampire, vampires don't have allergies! But what if he's not a vampire anymore? What then?*

Dr. Baker even asked what her relationship was to Angel. Maybe he was annoyed with how vague her answers were.

"He's my friend," Buffy explained after a moment's thought. The priest and the doctor regarded her silently. "We - were involved once. May I please see him now?"

"I'll go with Ms. Summers," offered Father Riley. The doctor acquiesced and moved on to other patients. The priest looked at Buffy. "That is, if it's okay with you," he amended.

Buffy simply nodded. Even though she really didn't know him, she did

trust Father Riley. At least for the moment she didn't mind the company.

She was silently escorted down the hall and to Angel's room. It was a small room, much like the one Willow had once stayed in. Buffy stopped in the doorway, unsure of what to do and more than a bit confused by the rush of events no one could explain to her. She took a moment to take a deep breath, then hesitantly moved to the bedside.

For a long moment Buffy stared transfixed at the heart monitor. It beeped and displayed a steady rhythm. She finally sat in the chair next to the bed and simply looked at Angel. He just looked like he was asleep. Buffy had never watched him sleep like this. Angel looked awfully pale, but perhaps not as pale as usual. His chest rose and fell with even breaths. Buffy found herself oddly fascinated by all the small things that made up the moment. Like the way a shaft of sunlight that snuck through the blinds made his hair look different, and how it looked as it gently illuminated one side of his face. She reached out to touch his sunlit cheek, and was surprised to find it warm. Living warm.

Then her mind caught up with what she was seeing and began to piece things together. Angel was breathing, had a heartbeat, and the sunlight did not hurt him. Could he be alive? Really, non-vampire, no-demon alive? On a sudden whim to test her theory Buffy unclasped the cross necklace from around her neck. She took Angel's left hand in her own, then, ever so slowly in case it burned him, placed the cross in his palm. Nothing happened.

Buffy heard a gasp behind her, and jumped in surprise. She had forgotten the priest's presence.

"It didn't burn him!" blurted Father Riley.

Buffy scowled at the man behind her. "You knew?" she queried.

Father Riley looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'll just . . . leave you two alone."

"No!" shouted Buffy, and Father Riley looked at her in surprise. "Not until you tell me what you know. All of it."

Father Riley looked surprised and a bit uncomfortable, but he reentered the room to stand beside Buffy. "I just know that . . . the cross burned him before. When I was doing CPR, my cross swung and hit him, here." The priest pointed to a small red mark on Angel's chin. "I'd never seen anyone . . . react that way to a symbol of my faith."

"But you still . . . helped him."

"Of course!" he explained. "He still was in need of my help. No matter how . . . odd the situation." Buffy looked at him seriously. "And you didn't do anything else?" she asked.

"Only prayed."

"Prayed?"

Father Riley nodded. "There was nothing else I could think of. Just CPR and prayer."

There was a long moment of silence as they both stared at Angel. Then Buffy turned to Father Riley and smiled slightly. If she was right, things were beginning to make a bit more sense. "Any chance that your prayer included, oh, banishment of demons?"

The priest looked at her curiously. "I suppose it might have. I wasn't really thinking about what I was saying, so a bit of a prayer for an exorcism may have made it's way in." He stopped in thought. "Why?" he asked.

Buffy said nothing in response. Calmly she took her necklace from Angel's limp hand and placed it back around her neck. "Thank you," she said finally.

Buffy did not turn away from Angel, but listened as the priest left the room. He paused before the door to speak again. "Ms. Summers?"

"Buffy."

"Buffy. The cross . . . it burned him before. You knew that, too. Now it doesn't. What changed?"

She smiled slightly and faced him for a moment. "Prayer," she said. Then her smile faded, and she clasped Angel's hand. "And, hopefully, a miracle." She turned away from the door, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Welcome to Sunnydale," she said. "Stranger things have happened."

With that, Father Riley left her alone.

* * *

> <h3>Part Five</h3>

_ "You brought your Sunday morning sunshine
> into my Monday morning rain
 You showed me happiness just one
time
> it keeps on coming back again."
 ~Sunday Morning Sunshine

> Harry Chapin

Sunnydale Hospital
> Late Saturday afternoon <p>

For a long while Buffy simply sat in silence, holding Angel's hand. As the sun moved across the sky, the small shaft of sunlight moved across his face. Buffy felt lost - she had no clue what to do. She could only sit, stare, and wait. The longest that she'd ever known Angel to be out for before was a few minutes, and that had been terrifying enough. This time he had already been down for hours. What had happened to him? What was happening now? Would he be okay? Would he . . . live?

Buffy stood for a moment to pace the small room. She stopped next to the window. It was still daylight outside, and would be for hours

yet, but sooner or later Buffy was going to have to leave. Most likely sooner, when visiting hours ended. Buffy slowly opened the blinds until the room was bathed in sunlight.

She turned to face Angel again. Leaning against the window, she began to speak, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I opened the blinds," she began. "I thought . . . maybe . . . if you could feel the sunlight . . . that you'd wake up." She laughed slightly, sadly. "It was a silly notion, but I didn't know what else to do."

There was no response, but she hadn't really been expecting one. She continued, speaking softly to Angel even though she knew he couldn't hear her. "I don't know what to do," she said again. "I wish I knew what happened to you. That someone could tell me it will be all right. I wish that . . . Giles were here to tell me what is going on. I wish . . . wish that you could tell me what's wrong." Buffy's voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm scared, Angel."

Buffy smiled bitterly. "I'm the Slayer, I'm not supposed to be scared, right? But . . . you're my only friend I thought nothing could ever harm. I never thought I'd see you like this. Here. I . . . I didn't even know you were back in town. I wasn't expecting my first time seeing you in months and it would be a priest and a doctor to tell me you're in town. I mean, you could have called. . . ." Buffy trailed off. "Oh god, I'm babbling," she muttered. She paused to think about what she was saying. "I missed you," she said.

"I missed you." A whisper.

Buffy moved quickly around the bedside, where Angel had just woken up. "Angel?" she asked softly.

He looked back at her and smiled slightly. "Hey Buffy," he said.

She smiled. "How . . . how do you feel?"

Angel frowned at that. "Awful," he stated. "Why do I feel awful?" He paused for a moment and looked intently at Buffy. "Where am I? What happened?" he asked.

Buffy smiled at his confusion and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. She took a deep breath and thought on what to say. "What happened . . . I was hoping you could tell me," she began. "But the rest I can answer. You are in the Sunnydale hospital, and . . . you're alive."

For a long moment Angel simply stared at her in shocked silence. Then his eyes wandered the room, taking in the medical equipment, the heart monitor, and the sunlight streaming through the window, before returning to look at Buffy's face. "Alive?" he asked.

Buffy tried to reply, but felt herself getting all choked up with emotion so that she could only smile and nod. Angel's face lit up with surprised happiness, and Buffy felt a stray tear escape her eye to run down her cheek. Angel reached up to brush it away and Buffy closed her eyes and leaned into his hand. Neither of them said a word.

The moment was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Visiting hours-" the nurse began, then stopped. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Look who's back among the living."

Buffy couldn't help but giggle. *How right you are!*

* * *

> <p>Angel came back to consciousness slowly. It was like clawing his way out of a deep well, and everytime he thought he was making progress he slipped into darkness again. True wakefulness came gradually, teasing him with sounds and feelings before he realized he was awake. <p>

It was Buffy's voice that greeted him as he returned to awareness. She was nearby and speaking softly. The tone of her voice - upset - broke through to him before he was awake enough to understand the words.

"I mean, you could have called," she was saying, then her voice broke off. She muttered something Angel could not hear under her breath, distressed.

Angel opened his eyes. The room was too bright; he had to blink several times before his eyes adjusted and he could see clearly. When he could he saw Buffy standing next to him, her head down. It was wonderful to see her again. But why was she so upset?

Finally, she spoke again. "I missed you," she stated.

Angel couldn't help but smile as he replied, "I missed you." To his surprise, it came out as a whisper.

Buffy jumped slightly as if startled, then quickly moved towards him to sit on the side of the bed and hold his hand. "Angel?" she said tentatively, her voice begging for reassurance.

He did his best to reassure her. It had been so long since he'd seen her, and he hated to see her upset. Continuing to smile ever so slightly, he replied, "Hey, Buffy."

Buffy broke into a smile then, suddenly seeming incredibly less troubled. She was so beautiful when she smiled. "How . . . how do you feel?" she asked gently.

As if her words had triggered it, Angel was suddenly aware of his body's condition. He was sore all over, especially his chest, and felt incredibly tired. "Awful," he replied. "Why do I feel awful?" The question felt stupid, but he couldn't think of anything better to say. Finally coming fully awake, Angel realized he had no clue where he was. The last thing he remembered he'd been walking down an alley "Where am I? What happened?"

She smiled again comfortingly and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. There was a hint of mischief glinting in her eyes that baffled Angel. She took a deep breath and leaned in a bit closer to speak. "What happened . . . I was hoping you could tell me. But the rest I can answer. You are in the Sunnydale hospital, and . . ." she paused then, her smile growing. "You're alive," she finished.

Angel could not figure out for a moment what she meant. When he did, he could only stare at her in shock. He let his eyes wander the room, noting it for what Buffy said it was - a hospital room. There was a heart monitor by the bed that beeped softly in the background. Was that his heartbeat? And the light - the sunlight . . . It was daytime and he was unharmed. Could such a thing be possible? He hadn't dared hope that he could truly live again. Yet here he was, so suddenly . . . It was a gift unasked for, undeserved, but miraculously given. He looked back at Buffy. "Alive?" he asked. *Really alive!?

Looking down at him, grinning with eyes suspiciously wet, Buffy simply nodded. *Alive!* It was really true? Why, yes! Angel could feel himself breathing when he thought about it. He hadn't noticed before. Angel smiled in surprised wonder. Why, if he concentrated he could even feel his heartbeat!

Buffy smiled in response, sharing in Angel's joy. A tear slid down her cheek. It glinted in the sunlight from the window like a tiny jewel. Angel reached up to brush it away, cupping her cheek in his hand. Buffy closed her eyes and leaned her head into his palm. He could only smile. This moment was so perfect he wished it could go on forever. Maybe, if he was truly human again, in a way it could.

Suddenly a knock came at the door to the room. "Visiting hours -," a nurse said, but stopped when both Buffy and Angel glanced at her in surprise. "Oh," she exclaimed, looking at Angel. "Look who's back among the living."

Buffy looked back at Angel, then began to giggle. He caught the joke as well and found himself grinning again. The nurse excused herself to get a doctor, looking confused. Buffy's giggles became full fledged laughter, and it was infectious. Soon Angel was joining in, and they both laughed until they didn't even know why they were laughing.

When their laughter died away, Buffy wiped tears from her eyes, then spoke. "You know," she said, "I don't think I've ever seen you really laugh before."

Angel thought about it for a moment. "I haven't had reason to laugh . . . in a long time."

They were both silent for a long moment. Finally, it was Buffy who spoke again. "You should have called," she mock admonished, "told me you were coming."

"I know. I guess . . . I wanted to surprise you."

"You surprised me," Buffy replied with a smile. "You definitely surprised me. Big points for surprise." She fell silent again, looking at Angel seriously. "You have no idea how much I missed you," she said softly.

"I bet I do," Angel assured her. *I missed you so much. I'm so glad to be . . . home.*

"Yeah," Buffy whispered, leaning close to him, and then they were suddenly kissing, reassuring each other and themselves that though

time had gone by, they still cared. They'd spent time apart, but their feelings hadn't changed.

They were still kissing when Dr. Baker came into the room. "Well," he said, getting their attention, "I thought you two only *used* to be involved."

Buffy pulled away sheepishly to look at the doctor, and Angel felt a bit embarrassed himself. "We were just . . . catching up on old times."

"Uh huh," acknowledged the doctor.

"Angel," Buffy spoke up, "this is Dr. Baker. One of the men responsible for . . . saving your life."

Angel smiled at Buffy's choice of words. "Thank you, Doctor," he said sincerely.

Dr. Baker simply nodded and then turned to speak to Buffy. "Visiting hours are over, Ms. Summers," he said gently. "And I really need to speak to Angel alone."

Buffy nodded and Angel looked at her startled. She was leaving? Leaving him here with all these doctors who would be asking him questions he truly couldn't answer? And he didn't even know exactly what had happened to him yet.

Some of his concern must have shown on his face, because Buffy spoke quickly to comfort him. "I asked Mom to call Giles before coming over here. He has to be a bit panicked by now," she explained. "I'll be back as soon as they'll let me in tomorrow. I'll probably bring Giles and the gang. They'll . . . want to see you, too." She gave him a small kiss then released his hand and stood up. "I still love you," she said, and left.

I love you, Buffy, thought Angel, and then focused his attention on one of his miracle workers.

* * *

> <h3>Part Six</h3>

_ "I'd give up forever to touch you
> 'cause I know that you feel me somehow
 You're the closest to
heaven that I've ever been
> and I don't want to go home right now"
 ~Iris
> Goo Goo Dolls

Sunnydale Hospital
> Sunday morning <p>

The sunrise greeted Angel when he awoke the next morning. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched as daylight came again, filling the world with color. Strange that something so beautiful could have been so dangerous for so many years. He could not pull away from the sight. Oddly enough, he could not remember ever watching a sunrise. If he'd ever seen one when he was first human the memory was lost in the centuries in between.

Angel was feeling much better this morning. He wasn't sore at all and felt awake and refreshed. If it wasn't for the fact that his stomach was complaining with a very human hunger, he would have said he was feeling back to normal. Okay, that and the fact that he was breathing. So maybe this wasn't normal at all, but physically he was just fine.

Emotionally, he was more than a bit overwhelmed. Overwhelmed, overjoyed, and a bit concerned. Since Angel had never dwelled for long on the hope to be human again, he had never put much thought into what it would mean for him. He didn't know what he would do, and he had a lot of questions no one could answer. In over 200 years he had come to rely on everything that being a vampire meant to him. What would he do now if those advantages were gone? Was his demon still there, silent and injured, but able to exert an influence again? Or was he truly free of it, fully human until he died a mortal death? And what might all this mean in regards to his curse? Though Angel was still not on good terms with Giles, he hoped Giles would be coming. Perhaps the Watcher would help him find some answers.

An orderly came by with breakfast only shortly before guests were allowed in the hospital, so it was that Angel was just finishing his meal as his awaited visitors arrived. Buffy entered the room with an enthusiastic greeting, followed shortly by Willow, Oz, Giles, and finally Xander.

"Wow," Willow muttered, focusing everyone's attention on her. "I mean, Buffy, you told me but . . . You, Angel, sunlight . . . wow."

"Yeah," Oz agreed. "It's cool."

Buffy sat down on the edge of the bed next to Angel. "Thanks, guys," she said. She turned to Angel, glancing for a moment at the meal tray. "Did we interrupt your breakfast?" she asked with a smile.

"No," Angel replied calmly. "I'm done. Besides, the food was vile."

"Yeah," Xander piped up. "You always did strike me as more of a steak tartar kind of guy."

"Xander!" scolded Buffy, while Willow shot him a glare.

"Sorry, sorry," muttered Xander, not sounding like he really meant it. "So," he began again, "Angel . . . hospital gown, it's a new look for you."

Angel just glared at him.

Giles cleared his throat. "Perhaps, before Xander puts his foot further in his mouth, we should, uh, discuss the matter at hand?" he suggested. When no one replied, he continued. "Angel, if you could tell us what happened. Then, Buffy, you fill in any gaps and we'll try and get a full picture of the, uh, situation."

Angel nodded, hoping that finally he would be finding out exactly what happened to him as well. So he began to relate his encounter in the alley when he first arrived. He told about the strange young man

who attacked him, chanting at him. Then he told about waking in the hospital. He tried to keep emotion out of his voice, but he couldn't help sounding confused.

"And you have no idea who it was that attacked you?" Giles asked.

"No," said Angel. "He was a young man, maybe twenty, human, with brown hair. Nothing special about him except that he knew some sort of magic."

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Buffy said, "Okay, I think I can fill in some more details." Angel listened intently as she began to tell everything she'd learned from Father Riley, from his prayer to Dr. Baker's efforts. When she reached her conclusion, Angel could think of nothing to say.

"So," Willow said, "what you're saying is this was some sort of accidental exorcism."

"Accidental exorcism?" asked Xander.

"Well," Giles commented, "it is possible, I suppose, if unprecedented. If the demon was already weakened . . . which may have been what happened with the . . . the attacker."

"But then shouldn't Angel be dust? I mean, no offense fella, but you are over 200 years old," Xander said.

Giles appeared flustered. "Well, uh, perhaps--"

"Perhaps the demon is still there," Angel said softly.

Buffy was quick to object. "Angel -- sunlight, crosses . . . breakfast?"

"Buffy's correct," Giles said. "It would appear that you are fully human. Unless there's something you're not telling us?"

"No, nothing," Angel replied.

"Alright then," said Giles. "I suppose we've found out all we can here. I'd best return home and consult my books. See if I can find out anything about this man that attacked you, and anything pertaining to this . . . unique situation."

Giles turned to leave. Angel was hesitant to speak up, but he had one more thing to ask. "Um, Giles?"

"Yes?"

"While you're . . . looking things up, could you look for one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"If . . . if I'm human again, what does this mean for the curse?"

Giles simply nodded and left the room. Angel found Buffy grinning at

him again, and he smiled slightly in return. He only hoped that when Giles' research was done they would all still have reason to smile.

* * *

> <h3>Epilogue</h3>

_ "A new moon leads me to
> woods of dreams and I follow
 A new world waits for me;
> my dream, my way"
 ~China Roses
> Enya

Monday Afternoon

Angel smiled, silently reveling in the feeling of sunlight all around him. The doctors had finally released him from the hospital, having found no cause for his "sudden heart attack" as they called it. Doctor Baker insisted that he see a heart specialist and would not let Angel leave until he agreed. Angel did so, knowing that was better than enlightening the doctor that his heart had not beat in almost 250 years. Now he was finally out of the hospital, and free to see what *life* had in store for him. For the moment, however, he was content just to stand here in the sunlight.

A small tug on his arm drew his attention. Buffy smiled at him. "Come on, Angel, let's get going."

Angel followed her silently for a moment. Buffy had come to pick him up today as soon as the doctors said he could leave. She insisted on driving him home, and he wasn't inclined to argue.

A couple of minutes (and several sharp turns that had Angel reflecting that perhaps the 'immortal' part of being a vampire wasn't so bad) later, Angel finally asked, "Buffy, where are we going?"

She turned to smile at him mischievously. "You'll see," she said.

Though it looked remarkably different in the daytime, gradually Angel began to recognize where they were. Of course, there wasn't much to Sunnydale, so a familiar landmark was all it took for him to get his bearings. So, when Buffy pulled up in front of the mansion he was only slightly surprised.

Not that Angel had any clue where else he could stay. And the mansion was where he'd last lived in Sunnydale. He'd even left some of his things behind here. But he supposed that he'd assumed that someone else would have taken up residence since he'd left. Besides, the mansion. . . .

Buffy opened the front door and Angel followed slowly behind her. Something was different about this place, something he couldn't quite figure out . . . until he stepped into the sunlit interior.

Inside, he hardly recognized the place. The decrepit, worn, long abandoned mansion had been scrubbed and cleaned until it looked almost new. The damage caused by various residents and visitors who had their battles within - broken windows and various other things

hastily repaired or covered up - while not completely repaired were well on their way. There were other changes as well. Glimpsed through a doorway he could see a bit of the kitchen, enough to see appliances that, though not new, were new to here. The various methods he'd taken to protect himself from the sunlight had been removed, leaving the mansion warm and inviting.

So amazed was he at the change in the place, Angel did not at first notice the presence of more people in the mansion. That is, until . . .

"Surprise!" yelled Willow, Oz, and Xander springing up from behind the couch along with Giles. A moment later, Mrs. Summers appeared from the kitchen, carrying a large tray of food.

"Anyone for cake?" she said with a small smile.

Angel stood just inside the door, staring at them all in shock. They'd done all this for him? He turned to Buffy, who simply smiled, then reached up and kissed him.

"Welcome home."

* * *

> <p>The Hunter continued in pursuit of his prey. He had found it's hiding place, followed it to its lair. He had followed the Slayer. Now, it was time to meet her face to face. <p>

End
file.